Self-Assessment to Improve Learners' English Discussion Skills

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In this study, an investigation into how self-assessment might help Japanese university students in a freshman English Discussion Class learn discussion skills was conducted. In each lesson, the students used a self-check sheet after each of two discussions to self-assess how well they used the discussion skills they had studied. After reflecting on their own performance in the first self-check, the students chose the criteria they wished to focus on in the second discussion. For the quantitative analysis of the effects of the self-assessment, the students' performance scores given by the instructor on the two discussions were compared. The results showed that the scores of the chosen criteria improved significantly more than those of the criteria they had not chosen. In addition, 10 students were randomly selected for interviews, and in the interview, they reported that the self-check had helped them understand the lesson objectives better and remember the skills for discussion. On this basis, the conclusion arrived at in this study is that self-assessment can help students to learn discussion skills.

　本研究では、大学一年生必修科目である英語ディスカッションクラスにおいて、自己評価がどのようにディスカッションスキルの学習に役立つかを考察した。各授業で、ディスカッションを2回行い、それぞれの後に、学生が自己評価表を使って、学習したディスカッションスキルが上手く使えたかを自己評価した。1度目の自己評価の後、向上したい項目を自己評価表の中から学生自身が選んだ。自己評価の効果の量的分析のため、2回のディスカッションの指導者の評価を比較した。その結果、学生が1度目の自己評価の後に選んだ項目における向上がその他の項目における向上を有意義なレベルで上回った。さらに、無作為に選ばれた学生10人と面接を行った。その中で共通した回答は、自己評価表のお陰で学習目標がより明らかになり、ディスカッションスキルを覚えるのに役立つというものだった。したがって、自己評価は学生のディスカッションスキルの学習に役立つと言える。

AS TASK-BASED language teaching (TBLT) and content-based language teaching have gained popularity worldwide, many language teachers and researchers have realized the importance of improving learners' autonomy. Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris (2009) have suggested the paradigm shift from teacher-centered, knowledge-oriented teaching to learner-centered, authentic task-oriented teaching requires "greater learner autonomy in the classroom" (p. 4). As Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) have noted, one of the major factors that facilitates successful second language learning is learner autonomy, which requires learners' ability to monitor what they can and what they cannot and to set their own goals within and beyond classroom contexts. In order to improve learners' autonomy, language teachers have attempted to implement consciousness-raising tasks, where learners are offered opportunities to *notice the gap* between what they wish to communicate and what they cannot com-

municate to accomplish the given tasks. For example, in Leow's (1997) study, awareness, which was enhanced by consciousness-raising tasks, facilitated learners' L2 learning while completing a problem-solving task, a technique often used in TBLT classrooms. Therefore, it can be said that consciousness-raising tasks can raise learners' awareness which is integral to noticing the gap and building monitoring skills.

Self-assessment is believed to have the potential to effectively enhance conscious learning and develop learners' monitoring skills to facilitate the learners' ability to notice gaps between what they want to say and what they cannot say. To date, several studies have investigated the effects of self-assessment. For example, McDonald and Boud (2003) in their experimental study found that the high school participants in Barbados who received formal training on self-assessment outperformed others when their results in the Caribbean Examinations Council examinations in Business Studies, Humanities, Science and Technical Studies were compared with those of students who did not receive the training. Ozogul, Olina, and Sullivan (2008) reported that lesson plans written by pre-service teachers improved with the use of self-assessment of the students' own lesson plans. Although the findings in these studies are encouraging, these studies are concerned with content areas in contexts other than second and foreign language instruction.

The research on self-assessment in second / foreign language teaching has primarily been concerned with whether the learners are able to assess their own performance accurately. Although many researchers have agreed that the ability to self-assess is helpful in learning, the findings with regard to the ability to self-assess were mixed. AlFallay (2004) and Chen (2006) showed that learners are able to assess their own performance, whereas Delgado, Guerrero, Goggin, and Ellis (1999) and Chen (2008) suggested that language learners need training in order to assess their own language abilities effectively. Matsuno (2009) and Sullivan and Hall (1997), on the other hand, argued that

language learners' ability to self-assess their own language skills depends on their language proficiency levels; the higher the language proficiency levels, the closer their self-assessment is to their tutors' assessment. Further differing results concerned with self-assessment in language learning have included evidence that learners overestimate their own performance (Sullivan & Lindgren, 2002) and that language learners are unable to assess their own performance effectively even when the assessment criteria are clearly set (Patri, 2002).

When self-assessment is used as a complementary assessment, as suggested by Brown and Hudson (1998), the learners' ability to self-assess seems highly relevant. However, even though the learners' self-assessment might not be as accurate as their tutors' assessment, it may help in language learning. Birjandi and Tamjid (2010) investigated the effects of journal writing as reflective self-assessment. They found journal writing promoted learners' motivation and concluded that self-assessment helps to promote learner autonomy. Such findings are particularly important as it is well documented that autonomous learning and motivation are crucial in successful language learning (Benson, 2006, 2007; Nakata, 2006; Noels, 2009). However, it is still unknown whether self-assessment helps learners to improve their performance in tasks using the target language.

Operationalizing Discussion

Since the self-assessment in the present study is used in English Discussion Class (EDC), the concept of discussion and the criteria in the construct should be explained. To understand the interaction among English language learners in group discussions, a few code schemes have been developed. One such code scheme was used in He and Dai's (2006) study using discourse analysis and corpus-based approach in order to examine the learners' interaction in group discussion tests: (a) (dis)agreeing, (b) asking for opinions or information, (c) challenging, (d)

supporting, (e) modifying, (f) persuading, (g) developing, and (h) negotiating meaning (pp. 378-379). Thus, it is apparent that discussion is comprised of several interactional skills, which for the purposes of this study are introduced as target discussion skills and functions in EDC. The specific criteria used in the self-assessment in the present study included giving opinions, asking for opinions, giving reasons, asking for reasons, giving examples, asking for examples, joining a discussion, asking others to join a discussion, connecting ideas, asking others to connect ideas, sharing experiences, asking others to share experiences, agreeing and disagreeing, asking speakers to clarify ideas, checking if listeners have understood, asking follow-up questions, and reacting to others' ideas.

Learning Context

All EDC classes are conducted based on the unified syllabus developed by the program, and the course objectives include developing students' English discussion skills, promoting fluency in oral English, and learning current issues through English discussion. Students discuss issues such as communication, education, values, human rights, and globalization where the focus is on developing fluency and discussion skills rather than accuracy.

Each lesson structure is also unified, where the instructor begins the lesson with a quiz based on homework reading, reviews previously learned skills and functions, and presents new skills or functions. All the skills, including the new and previously studied ones they have just reviewed, are written on the board as lesson objectives. Learners then have a number of chances to practice interactions in pairs and then discuss in groups for 16 minutes twice in a lesson. The primary goal of the EDC is to provide students with more than 60 minutes of speaking practice in a lesson. After each speaking component, the instructor provides the whole class with feedback on performance.

In terms of self-assessment, learners assessed their own use of the discussion skills rather than their language proficiency. Self-assessment was used after each discussion as an individualized guideline for each learner to set new goals for their subsequent group discussion. A simple self-check sheet consisting of eight questions where learners gave themselves scores based on a 5-point scale was used. For analysis of performance and as quantitative data for this study, the scores given by the instructor in the first and second group discussions were compared. In the present study, two research questions are raised. The first question aims to find whether learners can improve their performance on the discussion skills they have chosen based on their self-assessment. The other research question aims to investigate the extent that learners find self-assessment helpful in their learning of English discussion skills.

Methods
Participants

The participants were 94 university students in their freshman year at a university in Tokyo, and all of them were Japanese. All of the students were enrolled in a compulsory English Discussion Class taught by the researcher in the Spring Semester in 2011. Each of the 14 different classes was comprised of seven to nine students. They met for 90 minutes once a week throughout the semester.

Research Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in the study. Firstly, for the statistical analysis, quantitative data were collected. Learners who participated in this study used the self-check sheet shown in Table 1. For each lesson, the teacher listed eight criteria which were related to their learning objectives for that particular discussion class. The eight criteria on the

self-check sheet were written as yes/no questions from where students would score their own skills based on a 5-point scale. Learners were given the sheet before the first group discussion and used it after the first and second group discussions of each lesson. After the first group discussion, from the eight criteria on the sheet they were told to choose and circle two or three criteria in which they wished to improve upon in the next group discussion. They mostly chose the new ones probably because they felt they needed more practice on those new ones than the ones previously studied; there were few cases where learners chose the criteria that had been previously covered.

The scores the students received from the instructor in the criteria that they chose after the first group discussion (circled goals) were compared with those they did not choose (unmarked). In terms of assessment, without knowing the criteria the learners had chosen to focus on, the instructor evaluated the learners' performance on the same eight criteria as the self-check sheet and gave them scores based on the same 5-point scale (0-4) as on the learners' self-check sheets. These scores were given by the instructor for both the first and second group discussions. Improvements in each of the criteria were calculated by subtracting the instructor's score in each criterion for the first group discussion from that for the second group discussion.

The students' copies of the self-check sheets were used merely for students to set individualized goals for the subsequent group discussion. The learners received the scores for the whole lesson on the EDC Website. In other words, the learners set their goals independently without knowing the scores that the instructor had given; at the same time, the instructor also did not know what goals each learner established in class.

Table 1 shows an example self-check sheet with three circled criteria (1, 2, and 5) and five unmarked criteria. The instructor gave scores as in Table 2 for this learner. The scores for improvement on the three circled criteria were 1 (3-2), 1 (3-2), and 2 (4-2);

scores for improvement on the five unmarked criteria were 0 (3-3), 3 (3-0), 0 (2-2), 0 (2-2), and 0 (3-3). The results of scores for improvement in the circled and unmarked criteria were compared to see whether there was a significant difference. First an F-test was administered to see if the circled and unmarked criteria had equal variance. Then a t-test was administered to see if there was a significant difference between the circled and unmarked criteria in terms of the improvement scores.

Table 1. Sample Self-Check Sheet

During the discussion practice, …	D1	D2
1. Did you use today's function phrases to give opinions? (e.g. In my opinion, …/Personally speaking, I think … etc.)	③	4
2. Did you use today's function phrases to ask your friends' opinion? (e.g. What's your opinion?/What does everyone think? etc.)	②	4
3. Did you agree with your friends when you had the same opinion? (e.g. I totally agree with you./That's a good point./I think so, too. etc.)	4	4
4. Did you disagree with your friends when you had a different opinion? (e.g. I see your point, but …/I'm sorry but I disagree. … etc.)	0	1
5. Did you ask follow-up questions to get more information about your friend's idea? (Any questions to get more details about your friend's idea.)	②	3
6. Did you check if your friends understood your ideas? (e.g. Do you understand?/Do you follow me? etc.)	3	2
7. Did you ask questions when you didn't understand your friend's idea? (e.g. Could you say that again?/Sorry, I don't understand. etc.)	4	2
8. Did you make comments on your friends' ideas? (Anything about your friends' ideas)	2	2

Table 2. Sample Scores from Instructor

During the discussion practice, …	D1	D2
1. Did you use today's function phrases to give opinions? (e.g. In my opinion, … / Personally speaking, I think … etc.)	2	3
2. Did you use today's function phrases to ask your friends' opinion? (e.g. What's your opinion? / What does everyone think? etc.)	2	3
3. Did you agree with your friends when you had the same opinion? (e.g. I totally agree with you. / That's a good point. / I think so, too. etc.)	3	3
4. Did you disagree with your friends when you had a different opinion? (e.g. I see your point, but … / I'm sorry but I disagree. … etc.)	0	3
5. Did you ask follow-up questions to get more information about your friend's idea? (Any questions to get more details about your friend's idea.)	2	4
6. Did you check if your friends understood your ideas? (e.g. Do you understand? / Do you follow me? etc.)	2	2
7. Did you ask questions when you didn't understand your friend's idea? (e.g. Could you say that again? / Sorry, I don't understand. etc.)	2	2
8. Did you make comments on your friends' ideas? (Anything about your friends' ideas)	3	3

Qualitative data were collected from casual interviews with 10 learners chosen randomly. The interviews were conducted individually after the learners' final discussion test which was administered in the final week of the semester. In order to avoid miscommunication or difficulty in communication, all interview sessions were conducted in Japanese, the interviewer and interviewees' first language, two major interview questions were asked to elicit the students' thoughts about the self-check sheets: 1. Was the self-check sheet helpful? 2. If so, in what way did it help you? Interview sessions were not recorded for two reasons.

Firstly, the recording was avoided in order to maintain the casual nature of the interview and in the hope it would elicit the students' honest responses. Secondly, the learners reported that they did not feel comfortable with being recorded in the interviews. For these reasons, the researcher took careful field notes during the interview. The field notes on the learners' responses were categorized into positive and discouraging based on the content of their responses.

Results

The statistical analysis of this study is summarized in Table 3. Firstly, the F-test result showed that the circled and unmarked criteria have unequal variance ($F = 0.00 < 0.01$). Therefore, a heteroscedastic t-test was administered for the statistical comparison between these groups. The t-test result showed that the improvement scores in the circled criteria □□□ significantly higher than those in the unmarked criteria. There are 743 cases of circled criteria, and the improvement scores for these are summarized in Table 3. The average gain was 1.1 with the standard deviation of 0.7568. This result indicates that a majority of individual cases in the circled criteria showed at least some improvement. As for the unmarked criteria, there were 1513 cases which showed an average improvement of 0.21 with the standard deviation of 1.0553. The figure shows that although the scores improved on average, some scores deteriorated in several cases. In sum, the circled criteria focused on in the discussion from the self-assessment had significantly better improvement than the unmarked criteria.

Table 3. Summary of Statistical Analysis

	Number of Cases (*n*)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Circled	743	1.1	0.7568
Unmarked	1513	0.21	1.0553
F-test	0.00 (<0.01)		
t-test	21.484 (p<0.01)		

Furthermore, the learners' responses in the interviews indicated that the learners had positive reactions to using self-assessment. All interviewees reported that the self-check sheet was helpful in their classroom learning. The most common reason was that the self-check sheet helped the learners to understand what they were expected to do in class. According to eight out of 10 learners, in classes other than EDC, they sometimes did not know what they should do or what they should learn in class due to a lack of clearly stated objectives for each lesson. The self-check sheet helped the learners to understand the lesson objectives more clearly.

Another common reason given by interviewees was that the self-check sheet helped them to remember the phrases they were required to use. Again, eight learners said that sometimes they easily forgot the phrases, especially those they had learned in previous lessons. During the group discussions, they were not allowed to look at the self-check sheet. Therefore, in order to use the phrases, they had to remember them. Because the self-check sheet contained two or three example phrases, the learners reviewed those phrases as they evaluated their own performance after their first group discussion. Thus, the self-check sheet functioned as review material. Opportunities to review helped the learners to remember the phrases although both of them were quite brief.

Although not as common as the two reasons above, another reason given was that the self-check sheet helped the learners to discover what their own strengths and weaknesses were. According to six learners, by evaluating their own performances in their discussions, they discovered what they could do and what they could not. They also reported that they could monitor themselves even during the discussion more easily when they used the self-check sheet because they were able to focus on the criteria they wished to improve. The self-check sheet helped the learners to overcome their weaknesses in taking part in discussions.

Another positive response for the self-check sheet pertained to goal setting. Five learners reported that the self-check sheet helped them to set new goals for the next discussion. When they used the self-check sheet and the scores they gave themselves to evaluate their performance in the first group discussion, it was relatively easy to choose two or three criteria in which they wished to focus on in the next discussion because in most cases, the learners had two or three criteria in which they gave themselves low scores. They could simply choose those criteria with low scores and try to improve the scores during the second group discussion.

Although the majority of responses were positive and supportive of the self-check sheet, the learners reported some discouraging responses. One of the learners said that she found the self-check sheet helpful in her learning, but thought that there were probably a few learners who did not carefully evaluate their own performance. Another learner reported that for some learners, it might be difficult to remember what they actually did and what they did not do in the discussion. Since they did not evaluate themselves during the discussion, there might be some mistakes which were caused by poor recall. The same student further reported that when the discussion content became very interesting to him and he genuinely enjoyed the discussion, he tended to forget what discussion skills he used although he clearly remembered what his group had discussed.

Discussion

The results in the present study show that self-assessment helps learners improve their performance in discussion in the target language when it is used to set individualized learning objectives. Although students in many language classrooms may be at similar proficiency levels if they have been placed in their classes based on a placement test, it is still not easy to provide individualized feedback to help learners achieve their learning objectives mainly because individual learners have different strengths and weaknesses. When self-assessment is implemented in a language classroom for the purpose of helping the learners with setting individualized goals as in the present study, it effectively raises learners' consciousness and helps the learners to notice the gaps between what they can do and what they cannot do. This awareness helps the learners to improve their performance in subsequent group discussions. Therefore, although the findings in the present study are not concerned with linguistic forms, in terms of learning discussion skills, the present study lends support for Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1990, 1993).

As pointed out by Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001), several studies have examined the effects of different types of tasks, and found that some tasks help learners notice the gap between what the learners want to do and what they cannot do. One such task can be self-assessment. Self-assessment has often been considered an *alternative in assessment* as suggested by Brown and Hudson (1998, p. 657). Both Brown and Hudson and Norris, Brown, Hudson, and Yoshioka (1998) suggest that self-assessment requires direct students' involvement, encourages their autonomous learning, and increases their motivation. In addition to these advantages, the present study suggests another advantage. The main purpose of self-assessment in the present study was to help learners to establish new individual learning objectives based on their self-assessment. The results in the present study show that the self-assessment helped learners to set goals for and to perform better in subsequent discussions. In this regard, the present study lends support for Leow's (1997) role of awareness in learning.

Another important finding is that learners have an increasingly clear understanding of lesson objectives when they use self-assessment. Although only a small number of participants contributed to the qualitative portion of the present study, according to the participants, they often do not know what they are expected to learn in other language classrooms. The self-assessment used in their EDC lessons helped them to identify the objectives of each lesson. This suggests that in class (a) teachers telling and writing the learning objectives on the board might not have helped the learners understand the objectives clearly enough and (b) the self-assessment offered an additional, different approach to clarify the learning objectives. Although it is beyond the focus of this study, it is still not known whether understanding the lesson objectives itself improves learners' performance.

Although the present study does not investigate the learners' ability to assess their own performance, as Delgado et al. (1999) and Chen (2008) suggest, learners might need at least basic training to become familiar with self-assessment. At the beginning of the research, some of the participants misinterpreted the instruction and grading criteria of the self-check sheets. They simply wrote the numbers in their self-assessment that represented *how many times* they used the skills described. For example, when no communication breakdowns occurred in a discussion, students did not have to negotiate for meaning, which was one of the eight items in the sheet. Some students wrote "0" because they did not use the skill although they were told to write "4" in such case to prevent them from circling this criterion. This misinterpretation could be solved in future studies simply by replacing numbers with the letters A to E. Also ac-

cording to the participants, it is sometimes difficult to remember whether they actually performed the target skills well, simply because they do not remember clearly. Unlike assessing written works, self-assessment in oral skills requires caution because it involves learners' memory. Although the participants practiced using the self-check sheets in the first week, another practice session might have helped to familiarize them with the self-checking procedures.

Finally, the present study shows that self-assessment can improve learner performance in subsequent discussions, but whether they can maintain their skills and perform equally well in the future discussions is still unknown. Further research needs to be conducted to investigate whether self-assessment has delayed effects on their ability to perform the criteria identified for discussion. Also, the present study suggests that consciousness raised by self-assessment in learning helps the learners to improve their performance. The next step might be to investigate whether the conscious learning becomes automatic. If self-assessment has delayed effects, whether the learners are still conscious about the skills or whether the skills are already automatized resulting in the learners being able to use them without consciously having to access them seems to be an important distinction.

Conclusion

Self-assessment can be a powerful learning aid which can be easily used in a classroom to bring about positive effects on students' learning. The present study did not investigate whether the students' self-assessment was accurate, but even if it were not accurate, it met the purpose of helping learners to set increasingly clear learning objectives. With clearer objectives, the learners' discussion skills were measured by the teacher monitoring performance of discussion skills in two successive discussions and by comparing the results on the performance

objectives determined by the learners. Although the present study was not designed to see whether the improvement is retained over time, the initial improvement is necessary for fundamental learning. As students were able to reflect upon and monitor their own improvement through self-assessment, the self-check sheet brought a sense of accomplishment to students. In addition to seeing statistically significant results in discussion skills focused on after self-assessment, their improvement is believed to further motivate the learners. Therefore, it can be said that self-assessment is effective in facilitating learning English discussion skills.

Bio Data

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